



**UNLEARNING ANTHROPOCENTRISM<sup>1</sup>:**  
**the politics of knowledge in interspecies performance**

DESAPRENDER O ANTROPOCENTRISMO:  
a política do conhecimento na performance interespecies

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<sup>1</sup> Text originally presented in English at the event *Speaker Series: Politics and Performance* (Online, 2021) and available at <https://artist.net/archive/33305>.

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**Abstract**

How to think from human entanglement in nonhuman life rather than from an assumption of separation and exception? How to put a non-universalizing, dehumanist ethics of knowledge into practice? How to practice a politics of knowledge in relation to nonhuman animals, built on the principle of differential continuity or kinship in difference rather than the logic of analogy that is the shared logic of anthropocentrism and other oppressive modes of thought? This paper addresses the performative politics of knowledge at work in relation to concepts of politics, performance and animality and the emergence of interspecies performance as an ethico-political practice with reference to the work of Julietta Singh, Eva Meijer, Una Chaudhuri and Black vegan scholarship.

**Keywords:** animals; interspecies performance; anthropocentrism; animal politics; politics of knowledge.

**DESAPRENDER O ANTROPOCENTRISMO:  
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**Resumo**

Como pensar a partir do emaranhamento humano na vida não-humana, em vez de a partir de uma suposição de separação e exceção? Como colocar em prática uma ética do conhecimento não universalizante e desumanista? Como praticar uma política do conhecimento em relação aos animais não-humanos, construída sobre o princípio de uma continuidade diferencial ou do parentesco na diferença, em vez da lógica da analogia que é a lógica partilhada do antropocentrismo e de outros modos opressivos de pensamento? Este artigo aborda a política performativa do conhecimento operante em relação aos conceitos de política, performance e animalidade, e a emergência da performance interespecies como uma prática ético-política referenciada no trabalho de Julietta Singh, Eva Meijer, Una Chaudhuri e Black Vegan Scholarship.

**Palavras-chave:** animais; performance interespecies; antropocentrismo; política animal; política do conhecimento.



## **Introduction: the politics of ‘politics’ and ‘performance’ as concepts**

This chapter originates in a talk which I was invited to give as part of a seminar series concerned with the intersection of politics and performance – running alongside or as part of an MA module on Art and Activism at the University of Amsterdam. At the time, I considered that my talk might bring three different emphases to the seminar theme of the intersection of performance and politics. Firstly, there was the basic gesture of introducing nonhuman animals into the field of performance and politics at all. In both cases, I wanted to call for animals to be included in these fields: in the simple sense of being mentioned and being deserving of our attention and consideration, but also in the stronger sense of inclusion which concerns *how* animals are included – seeking to posit animals as actors/agents that are not just included in those fields on human terms but with the capacity to change them. In relation to the former, I noted how – despite the ubiquity of climate crisis as a topic on the political agenda and the growth of discourse taking animals seriously as political agents – there is still a dominant tendency for academic performance studies to consider politics almost exclusively in human terms. A recent anthology on politics and performance for instance does not include work on animal politics (Shirin et al, 2021).

Secondly, I noted that the politics of my own focus was specifically in terms of the *politics of knowledge* – as distinct from animal politics in terms of changes to legislation such as the UK animal sentience bill, or the work of the *Party for the Animals* in the Netherlands to secure rights for animals in law and policy. My project is more about the need to address how power works at the level of thought itself: in how we position ourselves in relation to that which we seek to know, how we create concepts, and how we think about ourselves as human researchers – with a particular emphasis on the need for change in how we perform research beyond paradigms of mastery and anthropocentrism (Singh, 2018). My research aims to address the unequal power relations embedded in *how* we think; or better, changing how we practice or perform thinking in relation to each other and to nonhuman animals to make it less authoritarian or oppressive. This involves rethinking fundamental concepts - like thought itself - not apart from but *with* nonhuman animals, potentially through practices such as interspecies performance.

Of course, the discourse around the relationship between power and knowledge is well already very well established, particularly in postcolonial studies. Influenced by Foucault, Said, Spivak, Mignolo and myriad others, there is a long history of thinking the close entanglement of knowledge and power – including the role that discourses and other



forms of knowledge-production play in allowing groups to exert power over others that speak for and about others in authoritarian ways. As Julietta Singh summarises in *Unthinking Mastery*: “a colonial master understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially and by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders “legitimate” the forceful imposition of his worldviews” (Singh, 2018, p. 09). Likewise in the context of Animal Studies, animal philosopher Eva Meijer’s project emphasises ‘the role that power relations play in constituting the meaning of concepts’ (Meijer, 2019, p. 09). One thing I share with Meijer is an interest in the politics of how concepts are defined and re-defined – whether we are talking about concepts of language, consciousness; and the sense of how what is included and excluded from a particular concept operates within a dynamic field of power relations. In this respect, I see my work as part of a wider, long-standing conversation about the ethics and politics of ways of knowing and increasing calls for new practices of research that think *alongside/with/from* rather than *about* their so-called ‘objects’ (as if those objects were not already thinking for themselves). Indeed, one starting point for my recent research project – *Performance Philosophy & Animals: Towards a Radical Equality*<sup>2</sup> – was a sense of the parallel between the power relations that determine disciplinary encounters between performance & philosophy on the one hand, and interspecies encounters between humans & nonhuman animals on the other – and the ways in which the question of who or what counts as (proper) ‘thinking’ and/or how different ways of thinking are valued in both domains.

This means that, in terms of performance I am trying to work with a broadened, inclusive approach that includes the performing arts but also goes beyond them. I am interested in the role that performance practices by artists might play in animal politics, but I am also interested in *the politics of the concept of performance itself* and how it might be more radically inclusive of and responsive to how animals perform in their own ways. Finally, I am concerned with the relationship between this and how we perform ourselves as researchers. An important part of the *Radical Equality* project for me is that it has become a site where I have returned to my artistic practice. I trained as an artist before I went into academia. And whilst it is not yet fully a project conducted in and as artistic research, I take

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<sup>2</sup> Launched in 2019, *Performance Philosophy & Animals: Towards a Radical Equality* originally began as Leadership Fellows project funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council. It has since expanded to a long-term project located in the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam. Further information is available on the project website <https://www.performingradicalequality.com/>.



seriously the kinds of thinking that are afforded to me by making images and producing creative writing as well as doing research in more standard academic forms<sup>3</sup>.

Then thirdly and finally, this work introduces the question about the relationship between performance, politics & *ethics*, and – for me – the question of where my own project might sit between these categories. In the past, and still for now, my tendency is to think that it is between the two – in the domain of the ‘ethico-political’ – insofar as it concerns the conventional political question of power, but also the ethical demand to think and relate to *difference* without subsuming it within the same, repressively. Specifically, my proposal is that we need an ethico-political practice of knowledge in relation to nonhuman animals, that is built on the principle of what we might call our ‘kinship in difference’ with animals - or a ‘differential’ continuity’ – rather than on principles of resemblance or analogy (or indeed of transcendent alterity).

Informed by the Deleuzian call to think difference in itself rather than difference as negation, derivative or subordinate to the same, difference – in this context – is less about the difference between things (like humans and animals) and more about the fundamental nature of change and movement. It is informed by the notion of time not as container but as the change immanent to life itself. For me, it is not that the alterity of nonhuman animals, including their duration or way of being in time, belongs to a realm that is beyond any aspect of our experience (bearing in mind that relation is not dependent on representation). Our capacity to know animal others is partial, but not impossible. So, my questions are: How to think from human entanglement in nonhuman life rather than from an assumption of separation and exception? How to put a dehumanist politics of knowledge into practice? How to we practice a politics of knowledge in relation to nonhuman animals, built on the principle of differential continuity or kinship in difference?

In order to explore these questions, I’m going to draw from material generated during the *Performance Philosophy & Animals* project. The project was built on three core collaborative relationships: with the UK-based company *Fevered Sleep*, with the US-based company, *Every house has a door* in collaboration with the Finnish artist Essi Kausaalainen & with the artist and writer, Rajni Shah – alongside our collaborators on a podcast project called *how to think*: Julietta Singh; Khairani Bharokka; and Omikemi.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to offer a brief autobiographical note that relates to this question of the politics of knowledge and how we perform ourselves as

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the expanded publication project *An [Interrupted] Bestiary* which took the form of an artist’s book, exhibition and short animated film, *Done Dying* (2021) co-imagined with Nicola Srubati, Abi Weaver, Daniele Rugo and composer, Steve Tromans. See: <https://arias.amsterdam/an-interrupted-bestiary/>.



researchers – informed by the beautiful work on this topic by Julietta Singh. At the start of her own influential monograph, *Unthinking Mastery* (2018), she writes:

While writing *Unthinking Mastery*, I began to see the book as an intimate engagement with my own struggles and desires, perhaps most poignantly because it came into being during a time of life when I was made to understand that I was a profoundly vulnerable yet enduring thing. The birth of a child, the untimely death of a close friend and colleague, the sudden loss of a beloved parent, the onset of intense and abiding pain, a precarious emergency surgery, a slow and disorienting rehabilitation – these particular events coalesced to insist on the need to become myself differently, to read myself otherwise, to learn myself as a radically dependent, immeasurably porous bodymind (Singh, 2018, p. vii).

Here, she draws our attention to the need for theories to practice what they preach in seeking to undo mastery – in order to avoid a kind of performative inconsistency (a masterful critique of mastery) and the potential role of autobiography in reshaping how we know as vulnerability rather than mastery. She goes on:

Conceiving of ourselves as intellectual masters over those bodies of knowledge (broad or discrete) that we have tasked ourselves to engage connects us to historical practices of mastery that our work seeks to explore and redress. We must with increasing urgency revise the very idea of (and the languages we use to describe) our work as intellectuals – with what resonances, and toward what possibilities (*Ibid.*, p. 9).

My own parallel experience of this came with the death of my father in February 2020, a matter of weeks after my first residency with *Every house has a door* and a collaboration with Fevered Sleep on a new iteration of the *Sheep Pig Goat* project at the University of Surrey Vet School. Before Dad died, I had already identified – in theory – the deep importance of experiences of both “not-knowing” and “unlearning” – the need to occupy states of openness, to suspend judgment and dismantle pre-existing assumptions – in order to make way for more reciprocal encounters and ethical ways of knowing nonhuman animals. But it was not until the last weeks of his illness and his death, that I really found myself propelled into the lived experience of what Fanny Howe (1998) calls “bewilderment” – a complete disorientation or loss of compass, but one that has the potential to open out into the possibility of re-orientation, the kind of not-knowing that might make space for new ways of knowing.

And then Covid came. Days after my father’s funeral, the UK went into its first period of lockdown. Through thinkers like Arundhati Roy (2020) and Roshi Joan Halifax (2020), I have come to understand this period of personal grieving through a pandemic (alongside and entangled with all our kinds of collective grief over racist violence and



climate crisis) as a kind of portal, ‘a gateway between one world and the next’ (Roy, 2020) or rite of passage (Halifax, 2020): a forced incapacity to carry on “as normal” that is both unbearably painful and potentially transformative. At times, this has been an intensive process of bewilderment, but I have also come to experience it as a vital ongoing lesson in how to practice new ways of knowing that affirm vulnerability rather than mastery (Singh, 2018). Rather than thinking of my grief as something that was merely stopping me from doing the work or as the ‘background’ to the work, I have come to appreciate that this *is* the work on an important level.

### **Why animal politics now?**

By now, one might hope that we no longer need to explain why animal politics matters. The urgency of animal politics should surely be increasingly difficult to ignore in the context of mass extinction. Recent studies in ecological science (Ceballos et al., 2017) have identified a “biological annihilation” of wildlife in recent decades and suggested that the sixth mass extinction in Earth’s history is already under way. Across the globe, wildlife is dying out because of habitat destruction, overhunting, toxic pollution, and climate change, but above all because of human overpopulation and overconsumption, especially by the wealthiest. More than five hundred species of land animals are on the brink of extinction and are likely to be lost within twenty years; the same number were lost over the whole of the last century.

The context for this research is also what we might describe as the ‘systemic anthropocentrism’ of Western capitalism and colonialism. I want to say that ‘we’ need to unlearn anthropocentric ways of thinking and acting. But of course, this ‘we’ is not universal. When we talk about ‘unlearning anthropocentrism’ it is necessary to do so both with the acknowledgment of the extent to which anthropocentrism has been distributed as part of globalization and colonialism, but also with the emphasis that alternative understandings of our interdependent and entangled relation to the nonhuman have always been there in indigenous cultures. Anthropocentrism does not need to be unlearned by everybody (or every *body*) to the same degree or in the same way. What needs to be unlearned and what form unlearning anthropocentrism takes will differ.

Mass extinction is part of the ‘end of the world’ narrative that has become almost too familiar to grasp. But there are more hopeful narratives as well. There have been huge shifts in attitudes to animals in science and culture over the last forty years: shifts that make clear how scientific studies of animal behaviour are of course not ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ but shaped by cultural norms of time and place (*eg.* advance expectation that males of the



species are dominant). Whereas in the 1970's, it would have been dismissed as mere anthropomorphism to consider animal emotion and culture; there is now an increasing willingness to see continuity between human-animal capacities and behavior. Is it too much to hope that Western culture might be edging towards the eventual collapse of human exceptionalism – the fantasy according to which only humans have language, are aware of their own mortality, make art?

For example, culture— broadly understood as the ability to socially accumulate and transfer knowledge – has historically thought to be an exclusively human trait. However, many scientists are now willing to describe whales and dolphins as having distinct cultures. Since 2000, growing scientific acceptance & body of evidence that whale species act and communicate differently based on how they are raised and carry on diverse traditions, in terms of their vocal practices, play, hunting behaviours, modes of gathering. Consider the practice of grief. Grief as a cultural practice is no longer seen as exceptional to humans. For instance, in 2018, a southern-resident killer whale known as Tahlequah pushed the body of her newborn, which had died shortly after its birth, around with her snout for seventeen days. As Craig Welch reflects: 'For years scientists vigorously avoided using emotional terms like happy, sad, playful or angry when describing animal behavior,' – for fear of being accused of anthropomorphism, but now 'many whale biologists believe Tahlequah's behaviour was a show of grief' (Welch, 2021).

#### *The politics of knowledge at the end of the world*

Thinkers in animal studies like Eva Meijer emphasise the role of human exceptionalism as a worldview or structure of knowledge in shaping behaviour: 'The destruction of the natural world is made possible because people see themselves as an exception, separate from that world' (Meijer, 2021, 53, translation my own). But it is not only this human exceptionalism that is the problem. The problem is a wider form of 'structural anthropocentrism' (Braidotti, 2018, p. 8): the embedded and embodied system of thinking that places the human at the centre of values. And it is this, I would argue, which emphasises why we still need a politics of knowledge alongside other forms of activism. Animal studies scholars like Meijer, but also Cary Wolfe (2009), and Vinciane Despret (2016), and decolonial/dehumanist thinkers like Julietta Singh (2018), all agree that our very approach to knowledge itself needs to change in the face of climate crisis and colonial violence. There is an increasing sense that it is not just that change needs to happen at the level of policy and law, but that we need to change how we think, 'the knowledge system in which we act' (Meijer, 2021, p. 60). In fact, I want to suggest that we





might re-phrase this to emphasise its performative dimension: thinking of anthropocentrism as the knowledge system we *enact*.

But *how?* *How* does our thinking need to change, not to save the world (because it can no longer be saved and/or we need to get out of the very logic of “saving” which retains the power for the human) but to live better as part of it? How can thinking and knowledge practices change to reduce the suffering of nonhuman animals including reducing the destruction of habitats and the extinction of species? For many, and as thinkers like Val Plumwood (2002) have long since argued, there is an increasing sense that “reason” is not the answer – not least because it tends to reinforce the idea of the human subject as master over the natural world and of reason as the sole property of humans. Just as we cannot think about ourselves as separate from the world and nonhuman life in terms of our behaviour, we also need to think about what that means from the point of view of knowledge. We need to rethink what we think of as knowledge from the perspective of our interconnectedness and entanglement with the nonhuman world including animals. We are not subjects standing apart from the world as an object who can produce knowledge about it as if our own point of view is the only one (that matters). Of course, it is hard to think about knowing anything for sure when the world is constantly changing and you are embedded in it, rather than taking a ‘god’s eye view’. But this is the task: thinking *from* vulnerability, interdependency, and ‘becoming’ or kinship in difference – although, as we shall see, there is not a universal vulnerability (Omikemi, 2021).

The *Radical Equality* project suggests that performance practices – as ways of knowing - have the capacity to make a significant contribution to this task. Both historically and today, the performing arts have been part of the problem of anthropocentrism – insofar as animals have often been used in performance in ways that pay little regard to their basic welfare. However, along with my collaborators, this project has allowed me to explore how the embodied arts of performance might also provide fundamental resources for interspecies empathy, understanding and communication: tools for exploring the languages we might share with animals and new ways of knowing both what we have in common and how we differ from them.

*Doubts: is the politics of knowledge a privilege?*

Whilst I am committed to this perspective, at times, I have real (self-)doubt about this emphasis on politics of knowledge – for a range of reasons. Faced with mass species extinction, habitat destruction and large-scale industrial farming, the politics of knowledge and perception and the kinds of performance practices that are aligned to this approach



can seem too slow or slight in their contribution to the change that is needed. From one perspective, I worry that a focus on the politics of knowledge is really just another expression of privilege – a slower approach to change that is only available to certain groups not otherwise pressed towards more direct action through the urgency of a problem. While we know that climate crisis affects ‘us’ all; we also know that it affects ‘us’ in radically unequal ways and that climate crisis reinforces social, racialized and geopolitical inequalities. And for some, a politics of knowledge perhaps feeds in too readily to a focus on individual behaviour, that allows larger institutions, governments, global corporations, and the world’s richest to avoid taking greater responsibility for structural change.

And yet, in less doubtful moments, I still cling to the sense that what we need is a ‘both’/’and’ perspective from which we can value more than one approach to dismantling anthropocentrism. There is a need for both a politics of knowledge/perception and (what could be construed as) more ‘direct’ forms of activism. Meijer (2021) suggests that critics often set up a false opposition between individual/behavioural and structural change; and likewise, I am influenced by another one of our podcast contributors – Omikemi’s reminder that: “Structures are people” – including the internalized forms of oppression we enact ourselves: “the system is me” (Omikemi 2021). For her part, Meijer notes how: “Political change is often associated with strength and violence. Revolution, images that are being knocked down... revolt. But maybe things start differently this time with the small, not the big. With good listening, attention to the new people, the small animals” (Meijer, 2021, p. 61).

### **The status of the animal in politics**

So, that was about the wider social context for this discussion. I want to hone in now a bit on the academic context. On the one hand, we are seeing a real intensification of interest in the notion of animal politics. Discourse on politics has been conventionally humanist. Acknowledgement that the “we” of ethics, politics, is often exclusively human: “We, the people”. Of course, the animal rights movement has been around since the 1970s, but arguably this has all too often been seen as a separate branch of politics, an area of “special interest” rather than a core part of the political field. However, recent years have seen what Meijer has described as “The political turn in animal studies” (Meijer, 2019, p. 8). This include work about animals being done in the context of political philosophy like Mark Rowlands (2009); Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) and Robert Garner (2013) and includes exciting developments such as ‘recent proposals for citizenship and sovereignty for non-human animals’ (Meijer, 2019, p. 11). Scholarship in this turn argues



that we need to take animals seriously as political actors and fellow citizens – as capable of and already participating in politics, and as deserving of representation in politics (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011). Political issues such as freedom of movement need no longer be considered as solely affecting humans – but need to be addressed in terms of what rights animals have to choose where they live, and with whom.

On the other, we are seeing a parallel intensification of interest in the ethico-political in animal performance – with the emergence of the field of ‘interspecies performance’ (Knowles, 2013; Chaudhuri and Hughes, 2014; Cull Ó Maoilearca and Fitzgerald-Allsopp, 2023). As I noted at the start, the discourse on the politics of performance has often been focussed on humans; at the same time, there has been an “animal turn” in performance, but this was not necessarily politically or ethically oriented until recently. That is, the last twenty years has seen an ‘animal turn’ in theatre and performance research (see for example: Read, 2000, 2008; Ridout, 2006; Tait, 2012; Orozco, 2013; Chaudhuri and Hughes, 2014; Parker-Starbuck & Orozco, 2015; Chaudhuri, 2016; Carlson, 2018). But whilst politics and epistemology has been a feature of some of this work, not all historic work operating at the intersections of animals and performance has been concerned to dismantle anthropocentrism, indeed some has served to reinforce it. But we are now in the midst of an ethico-political turn within the animal turn including the emergence of “interspecies performance” as a specifically ethico-political orientation (Chaudhuri; Hughes, 2014).

For instance, within the domain of European and North American experimental theatre and performance (if not in mainstream entertainment), there has been a notable change in approaches to the animal in performance – shifting from the “use” of live animals in theatre and performance (either as metaphor or as a short cut to a certain kind of ‘reality effect’), towards the use of performance as a potential way of coming to know animal lives. Rather than using animals for aesthetic purposes – for example, insofar as ‘a performance’s liveness is also accentuated by the risk of animals’ unpredictability’ (Allain; Harvie, 2013, p. 129) – more recent interspecies practice seems more interested in the idea of using performance as ways of knowing animals differently and, indeed, unlearning existing assumptions about them.

The emerging field of interspecies performance – including the pioneering work of Una Chaudhuri (2014; 2016) and Ric Knowles (2013) in particular – could be seen as one instance of this ‘ethical turn’. As Chaudhuri has discussed, the notion of interspecies performance can be understood in a range of ways. Most commonly perhaps, interspecies performance might be considered as events and practices ‘that involve actual animals doing



things alongside human performers’: the act of bringing real, living, nonhuman animals onstage’ (Chaudhuri; Hughes, 2014, p. 06). In this respect, she continues, ‘the circus is the classic site of that kind of interspecies performance’ but it also has its established traditions across the performing arts, raising ‘questions about the ethics of training, captivity, and the commercial use of animals’ (*Ibid.*).

But Chaudhuri wants to give the term interspecies performance an ethical and epistemological focus: there is a new and distinctive category of animal act being performed now best defined by its values rather than by whether it literally includes live animals. For Chaudhuri (2014), interspecies performance may not involve live animals but subscribe to what she outlines as three core qualities or ‘articles of faith’: 1) a concern with actual animals; 2) a commitment to acting on behalf of actual animals or creating change in the lives of real animals; and 3) contributing to a sense of ‘epistemological crisis’ (positively construed) with respect to nonhuman knowledge of nonhuman animals. In this way, Chaudhuri is claiming that there is a new and distinctive category of animal act being performed now best defined by its values rather than by whether it literally includes live animals.

In 2013, Ric Knowles edited a special issue of *Theatre Journal* on ‘the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of interspecies performance’ (Knowles, 2013, p. iv): an issue which he productively described as an extension of the critical interculturalist project to include the consideration of the relations between ‘species — animal, plant, insect, and other’ (*Ibid.*, p. i). In his editorial, Knowles engaged a Deleuzian vocabulary to draw parallels with the ethico-political agenda of intercultural performance, arguing that there was now ‘an urgent need to reconsider interspecies performance as a horizontalist and rhizomatic project in which no one partner in the exchange and negotiation dominates — a consideration that has significant implications for the question of who the “target audience” is for interspecies performance, who initiates and dictates the terms of the event, and, crucially, who or what benefits from it’ (*Ibid.*). Critically, Knowles closes his editorial with some questions, asking:

Who is the *audience* for interspecies performance (is it always or necessarily human?), and how does the researcher take into account interspecies performance that does not involve humans, does not involve human agency, or that bypasses human brokerage? If we are serious about the reciprocity of the interspecies, we must be willing to address, as actors and as audiences, the potential absence or inconsequence of human participation. (Knowles, 2013, p. v).

And indeed, as we’ll see, there has been an increasing interest in the idea of both animals as audiences and actors (Ulrich, 2017). However, Knowles’ principal concern here



seems to be to push us towards the (more radical) idea of interspecies performance in the absence of humans altogether and to the question of how nonhumans perform for themselves and each other. Of course, given the inextricable entanglement and interdependency of human and nonhuman lives, there is surely no ‘purely’ nonhuman (or human) performance in this sense. The beluga whale – for instance – performs for itself and for others in ways that are shaped by the context of human-made phenomena like ocean noise. And yet, perhaps we can still take up the invitation to reflect upon forms of interspecies performance that occur with minimal degrees of human influence<sup>4</sup>.

### **Fevered Sleep’s *Sheep Pig Goat***

I suggest that Fevered Sleep’s project, *Sheep Pig Goat* can be considered a work of interspecies performance in Chaudhuri’s sense. Held in a London warehouse trying to be as much like a barn as possible, *Sheep Pig Goat* presented a series of improvised encounters between humans and nonhuman animals: specifically, three sheep, two female Tamworth pigs (who are kept by their handlers for breeding) and a group of four rescued goats (all adolescent males). The animals involved were chosen for their familiarity with human contact and were transported to the site from a farm in Wales, along with their handlers who were present for all of the encounters to attend to the animals’ welfare. The human performers included a bass clarinetist, viola player, double bassist, singer, and two contemporary dancers, whom the directors described as providing a “toolbox” for the unknown requirements of the work to come: all expert improvisers, all expert non-verbal conversationalists, valued by the company for their heightened competencies in relational attentiveness. The project aimed to provide human visitors with what co-director David Harradine calls: a space to ‘properly, respectfully and carefully observe animals watching a performance and reflect and report back on what they’ve seen, whether it’s the body language of a pig or a goat’ (Gardner, 2017).

Described as a “creative research studio” rather than a show, *Sheep Pig Goat* was framed as a use of performance to investigate a series of questions, including: “how well do humans see animals as they really are – not as we tell ourselves they are?”; and “what do animals perceive, when they perceive us?”. However, its engagement in questioning also took place in and as the improvisational practices of the participating dancers and musicians. Naturally, the performers began with what they knew: techniques of structured

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss this idea further in: CULL O MAOILEARCA, Laura. Unlearning Anthropocentrism in Performance Studies. Towards an interspecies ethics of knowledge. In: BUDRIESI, Laura (ed.). *Animal Performance Studies*. Torino: Accademia University Press/Mimesis Journal Books, 2023. p. 53-69.



play, call and response, embodied invitation, and listening. Improvisation offers rich resources for the enactment of ethical approaches to knowledge-production of nonhuman animals: allowing performers to hold themselves in states of heightened openness and responsiveness to the continuity and difference of other bodies and employing strategies to approach creation (of movement or sound) as a fundamentally relational process emerging from unpredictable qualities of specific encounters rather than from individual authorial intention. However, even if improvisation processes like contact improvisation in dance and free improvisation in music are ostensibly concerned with novelty and “detraining,” they are also matters of technique and expertise: practices in which performers can find themselves settling into habits or styles as much as in other modes of creative production. No matter how much *Sheep Pig Goat* had been set up as a “research studio” rather than a show, both the performers and the directors experienced some degree of pressure “to perform” according to normative, humanist ideas of what counts as aesthetically pleasing or interesting behaviour.

This is the first destabilizing demand on the performers. In post-Encounter discussions, dancer Kip Johnson spoke about the shift between encountering his own ego in performance in the moment of internally evaluating his own movements and the dissolution of these values in the attempt to see himself from the animals’ point of view<sup>5</sup>. As I will return to later, there is then a second demand: that the action is not about performing “for” either the human or nonhuman animal audience according to existing ideas of what that act involves, but a sharing of the modes of action that might emerge in and as a more reciprocally transformative encounter. Performance does not precede but is produced by the encounter; dancer and pig co-create each other. Whereas the classical conception of agency conceives it as an individual attribute exclusive to humans, the relational paradigm (Despret, 2016 and others) rethinks it as interdependency: this always already interspecies, agential dance.

An appropriate response to the question of what happened in these Encounters must take the form of an ‘and-and’ rather than an ‘either-or’. *Sheep Pig Goat* was a demonstration of performance’s epistemic force. But it was also a project from which the directors emerged speaking not of a “contribution to knowledge” but of an “abyss of ignorance.”<sup>6</sup> It

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<sup>5</sup> Kip Johnson reflected that “I think I am definitely learning that I have been conditioned to be affected or wanting to please the people watching. I’m realizing quite how deeply embedded that is in me.” See “Sheep Pig Goat Conversation — 11th December 2017,” unpublished transcript of a conversation between the artistic directors of *Fevered Sleep* and their performers who were part of *Sheep Pig Goat*. In the future, this transcript will be publicly available in the *Sheep Pig Goat* archive held by the Wellcome Collection in London.

<sup>6</sup> David Harradine, unpublished remarks during the event “Interspecies Performance,” held at the University of Surrey, May 2018.



was a site of learning, but it was also one of unlearning; or, of new learning through unlearning--since, having exited the paradigm of mastery, there is no reason why research cannot be defined as that which makes the world more rather than less strange to us (as Despret suggests). In this respect, *Sheep Pig Goat* acts as a response to Despret's call "to learn to encounter animals as if they were strangers, so as to unlearn all of the idiotic assumptions that have been made about them" ; to unlearn the subtractive perception that allows me to see "the identity of animals as reducible to species membership" (Despret, 2016, p. 02); to see this sheep, not a sheep – for example.

Recent years have seen a number of contemporary projects that seek to reverse the roles of human and nonhuman animals in performance – offering to real animals the position of observer rather than observed (as in Krõõt Juurak and Alex Bailey's *Performances for Pets*, 2014), or of trainer rather than trained (as in Ang Bartram's *Human School*, 2019). But the reversal is not necessarily emancipatory in itself. There is no guarantee of a reevaluation of values through the sheer act of positioning of animals as audiences. Indeed, as Jessica Ulrich (2017, s/p) discusses with respect to Annika Kahrs' 2013 piece *Playing to the Birds*, such reversals can serve to reinforce anthropocentrism: "Art that confronts animals with human paintings or plays human music to animals stays deeply anthropocentric and clings to a value system animals usually cannot relate to." In Kahrs' piece, for instance, Franz Liszt's *Legend Number 1. Sermon to the birds by Saint Francis of Assisi* is performed to an audience of caged birds in a concert hall. As Ulrich suggests, the emphasis is very much on 'the musical preaching of an all too human convention of music,' rather than any responsiveness to the birds' themselves who have no choice (it seems) but to listen from their confinement.

So, does Ulrich's criticism apply to *Sheep Pig Goat*? For their part, Fevered Sleep emphasize that the animals were invited to act as spectators "on their own terms," which might include choosing to leave the space of the encounters. Likewise, the nature of the musicians' performance was radically different from Kahrs' work insofar as it was fully improvised and ostensibly structured to be responsive to the sounds made by the animals themselves. However, the company have reflected on the ways in which the encounters changed over the course of the week: becoming "more to do with being together rather than dancing or playing or singing for. 'How can you leave a trail of scent for this pig with your breath?' rather than 'can you see if this sheep will watch you dance?'" (Harradine *apud* Fevered Sleep; Cull Ó Maoilearca, 2019) Is this the beginning of how the animal animalizes performance? The performer is, still, performing for the animal, but in a context where performing no longer means "dancing or playing or singing" so much as leaving a trail of



scent because her audience is a being who produces a world where smell means more than sound. What matters is our openness to mutating performance itself – finding “tools” to open human art to the diverse interests of animals as they manifest in specific encounters. The aim is to embody a kind of behavioral openness to what performance might become through interspecies encounters, rather than measuring the unknown according to extant (human) standards.

### **Expanding concepts to include animals**

So, I spoke at the start about the politics of knowledge in terms of the power dynamics that shape the creation of concepts. So now I want to look at two examples of how this works within the fields of animal politics and animal performance. Firstly, I want to look at how power operates in the creation of concepts of language: as a means for zones of inclusion, exclusion and hierarchy in terms of relationships between humans and animals. This politics of concept creation is clearly outlined by Eva Meijer in her important book, *When Animals Speak* (2019):

Other animals have been excluded from this concept very early on in Western traditions of thinking... Aristotle famously separated human language from non-human animal uses of voice, thereby drawing boundaries around “language” and the political community in one movement. This is not a neutral or natural step: unequal power relations play a role in this process, and we could even say that our view of language has been constructed by excluding other animals. In order to develop a theory of non-human animal and interspecies languages, we cannot, therefore, simply draw on ethological research that investigates the linguistic capacities of other animals and say that other animals “have” language; we also need to investigate how this concept was constructed and how it is used and has been used in relation to other animals’ (Meijer, 2019, p. 09).

Some of the advances in animal politics are because researchers are now challenging historic assumptions about the relationships between nonhuman animals and language (and notions of ‘voice’) and the impact of this on politics. For example, Meijer’s book investigates ‘how existing political practices and institutions can be extended to incorporate non-human animal political voices, and to explore new ways of interacting with other animals politically’ (*Ibid.*, 12). Even just the title – *When Animals Speak* – tells us that this thinking moves away from a political model where humans are tasked with giving voice to nonhumans animals understood as beings who cannot speak for themselves, towards a model based on the idea that animals do indeed already speak in their own ways – and where the new task for humans is to acknowledge animals as indeed speaking and having





voices that have political interests and consequences, and to get better at listening to what they are saying. Moving away from use of language as marker of human exceptionalism and measuring animal language ability according to human standards, there is a growing acceptance of the notion of animal languages and that animals speak – both in animal science and indeed in (socio)linguistics (such as in the important work of Leonie Cornips, 2022), which has historically been exclusively concerned with human languages. And yet, at the same time, Meijer notes that:

Many animal rights theorists [still] simply assume that other animals do not use language, cannot speak in a way that is relevant to political action, and are destined to stay silent in political and social matters. There are very few animal rights theorists who incorporate the current research on non-human animal, or interspecies, languages in their work... Activists and philosophers currently often see it as unavoidable that “we” should speak for “them”. This is unfortunate... because it perpetuates a negative stereotype of other animals as mute, or incapable of speaking, and keeps intact an idealized view of the human and human language (Meijer, 2019, p. 04).

Secondly, though, I want to show how performance is also a good example of how unequal power relations both produce and are produced by the formation of concepts. Researchers in both Performance Studies and Animal Studies have used concepts of performance to shore up human exceptionalism. In the founding years of Performance Studies for example, we can see both the exclusive gesture where figures like Victor Turner use the concept of performance to reinforce the exceptional nature of the human (as *homo performans*) and the ambivalence of someone like Richard Schechner who makes gestures towards the inclusion of animals on his broad-spectrum definition of performance only to ultimately exclude all but those primates who are most ‘like us’ by settling on a definition of ‘true’ performance as ‘deliberate, conscious, chosen activity’ (Schechner, 2003, p. 97-98). For Turner for example, performance is essential to the nature of the human ‘not in the sense... that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that man is a self-performing animal... in performing he reveals himself to himself’ (Turner, 1986, p. 81). In turn, Schechner argues that ‘Performance probably belongs only to a few primates, including humans... Humans do consciously, by choice, lower animals do automatically; the displaying peacock is not “self-conscious” in the way an adolescent male human is on Saturday night’ (Schechner, 2003, p. 98).



## **The human standard / the standard human**

### *Measuring animals according to human standards*

So, both in the case of language and performance, I am interested in how we get beyond this problem of measuring animals according to a human standard. But I am also interested in the question of who this “us” is – who is this ‘standard human’ with respect to human groups, who is being positioned as a normative figure. The particular model of inclusion here is one that operates according to a logic of analogy or resemblance. Alternatively, we might identify it as a quantitative rather than qualitative mode of inclusion where a given institution, domain, system or concept is expanded quantitatively to include more groups but without any qualitative change to the system itself. And, in this respect, it resonates with and relates to the critique of a standard liberal or universalist model of democracy – where inclusion requires the subtraction of particularity and operates as ‘a system of inclusion via subtraction and exclusion’ (Smith, 2016, p.72).

Certainly, contemporary animal studies is seeking to address the problem of animals being measured according to a human standard. In the politics of knowledge and concept creation, this figures as a gesture wherein aspects of nonhuman life are measured according to a human standard which oppressively subordinates difference to the same. For example, as we’ve seen, language is defined as human language; performance is only performance proper if it operates like human performance and so on. In animal rights discourse, scholars suggest we need new ethico-political models that move beyond “the expanding circle” (Singer, 2011) model of moral consideration. In turn, if we want to think about the politics of animal performance, we might be informed by works such as Vinciane Despret’s *What Would Animals Say if we asked the Right Questions* (2016)? Informed by Despret’s, we need to ask the right (and polite) questions about the relationship between animals and performance, namely: not ‘*can* animals perform?’ (which implies the silent and acknowledged act of measuring the extent to which animals perform ‘like us’), but rather: *how* do animals perform?

This effort to dismantle anthropocentrism in concept creation also has methodological implications insofar rethinking politics, language and performance need to be dialogical *interspecies* projects not only human ones (Meijer, 2019, p. 08). As Meijer says, we ‘need to be careful not to use the human as a standard for measuring other animals, because this pre-excludes many of them, and makes it difficult to see them in their own right. This means we need to challenge human exceptionalism together with the view that there is a binary opposition between “the human” and “the animal”. We should pay



attention to the variety of ways in which other animals speak and act politically, and search for ways to form new, better relations with them. This should not just be a human project, because other animals have their unique perspectives on their own lives and on their relations with humans, and their own ways of formulating these. Humans and other animals can, and already do, have relation in which species is not the determining factor in achieving understanding or intimacy, and in which humans aim not to oppress the other animals with whom they share households or land. These relations can offer us insights into how change is possible and can function as starting points for thinking about new forms of coexistence' (Meijer, 2019, p. 08).

*Researchers "like us": measuring knowledge according to the 'standard human'*

But I am also interested in how this relates to the problem of measuring human lives according to the notion of a 'standard human' – in three different ways. Firstly, how we think about ourselves as researchers beyond paradigms of mastery. Here, the measure in question is the standard human as rational agent, the disembodied human subject. We need to change *how* we study (our concepts of knowledge) not just *what* we study. As Cary Wolfe suggests: 'To put it bluntly, just because we study nonhuman animals does not mean that we are not continuing to be humanist—and therefore, by definition, anthropocentric' (Wolfe, 2009, p. 568). Following Wolfe, Performance Studies needs to question 'the humanist schema of the knowing subject...the picture of the human as constituted... by critical introspection and self-reflection that is, after all, a hallmark of humanism' (*Ibid.*, p. 569-70). Or, in turn, as J.M. Coetzee has remarked, scientists themselves continue to be perceived as 'the ultimate practitioners of (human) reason' and hence as both emblems of human exceptionalism and the authority on what nonhuman behavior means (Coetzee, p. ix). Such scientism is at odds with the need to 'decentre rationality and abandon exclusionary concepts of rationality' (Plumwood, 2002, p. 194) called for by environmental ethicists like Val Plumwood and Traci Warkentin. As Warkentin notes 'The rational, disembodied human subject has become the centre, and gold standard, of knowing and of moral judgment, which is the basis of a human-centred, or anthropocentric, ethic' (Warkentin, 2010, p. 103). In contrast, if we want to work towards the kinds of 'dialogical interspecies ethics' for which Plumwood and others advocate, then we need to be open to more inclusive and pluralist views of what counts as (proper) knowledge, thought, and communication. What follows then is not an argument for an evaluation of performance-based knowledge over science, or for art without science, but for an



‘accumulative’ rather than ‘eliminative’ model of knowledges: an ‘and–and’ that multiplies the voices that can be heard including nonhuman ones (Latour *apud* Despret, 2016).

Secondly, I want to consider how this logic of the “like us” – links how we think about the relationship between the logic of anthropocentrism and the logics of other forms of oppression – where the notion of the ‘standard human’ operates to determine who counts as fully human amongst human groups. Here, inclusion for those who are like “us” means the standard human as the “*white, male* subject of Reason”. Meijer (2019) cites the slogan of animal liberation: “No one is free until we all are free” – noting that the democratic ‘we’ has historically excluded the animal. At the same time, of course, the “we” of democracy has historically operated and continues to operate as an act of exclusion within the human on the grounds of gender, race, disability, age, religion etc. This raises the question of how animal liberation movements relate to other social justice movements and how nonhuman animal oppression intersects with other forms of oppression. Clearly, crude equations of oppressions (as sometimes used by the white animal rights movement) – such as speciesism = racism – are offensive. But Black vegan scholars and decolonial and dehumanist thinkers like Julietta Singh have taken care to emphasise the ways in which anthropocentrism or speciesism and other forms of oppression intersect beyond false comparisons. This work demonstrates how shared logics that place the “white, male subject of Reason” at the centre of values [as the universal human] operate to justify nonhuman animal oppression, sexism and racism.

In this context, we might ask if the kinds of affective experiment at work undertaken by the human performers in *Sheep Pig Goat* (what we might call its forms of ‘becoming-animal’) are merely a privilege – if by privilege we mean not only that which is available to the few who benefit from structural advantages, but also that which depends on the exploitation and oppression of others? Is becoming-animal a privilege of whiteness (including a kind of emotional or affective privilege) insofar as people of colour and other marginalized groups continue to be animalized pejoratively? And before I offer a response, I want to simply acknowledge here that I inhabit a body that is identified as white. I have no lived experience of racialization or embodied knowledge of racist oppression – which includes dehumanization and animalization. And that this means that I do not know – in one fundamental respect – what I am talking about but I am dependent upon the embodied knowledge of others to support my own (un)learning.

Colonialism continues to use the tactic of animalization: which Julia Feliz Brueck defines as “the purposeful denigration of marginalised groups to the level of nonhuman animals” (Brueck, 2019, p. 68). For Brueck and other vegan scholars of colour, this is an



instance of white supremacy using the human-animal divide – or the othering of nonhuman animals - as a tool in the oppression of people of colour. It can lead to an internalised form of what she calls “racialised speciesism” where people of colour are forced to defend their distinction from animals in ways that whiteness does not. In this context, is becoming-animal a privilege unavailable to those against whom white supremacy uses animalization as one tactic amongst others to deny personhood and rights? Is it a privilege to be able to focus on nonhuman animal oppression, whilst communities of colour are still fighting for ‘the right to live’ and ‘the mere recognition of our personhood’ (Brueck; Rodriguez; White, 2019, p. 41)? Does it undermine that fight to affirm that all humans are animals (and differ from nonhuman animals in degree rather than kind) given the unequal ways in which Black, indigenous, other people of colour (BIPoC) and other marginalised communities are subject to animalization? For her part, Syl Ko has argued that there are significant risks associated with the strategy of humanization in anti-racist contexts so long as humanity remains defined in terms of whiteness (Ko, 2017, p. 26).

1970’s white, animal liberation discourses equated speciesism, sexism and racism in a manner that can problematically seem to render different forms and lived experiences of oppression as identical to each other. In contrast, contemporary black veganism – as led by key thinkers such as Breeze Harper (2020), and Aph Ko and Syl Ko (2017) – rejects the white supremacist equation of communities of colour to nonhuman animals, but at the same time as pointing toward the ‘layers of interconnections’ between the oppression of nonhuman animals and people of colour. Rejecting the animalization of BIPoC and other marginalised groups need not involve reinforcing the ontological opposition of humans and nonhumans. Contra a single issue model of advocacy (that promotes the idea of the oppressed as in competition with each other, and has seen white veganism ignore or even work against other social justice movements), there is a long standing and growing movement of intersectional veganism that calls for a “consistently anti-oppressive” stance built on an understanding of how “the exploitation of human and nonhuman animals are intertwined” – inseparable though not “the same” (Yomoah, 2019, p. 46).

Human activist resources, time, physical and affective energy are clearly limited - especially for those battling the violence of white supremacy on a daily basis (in different ways and to different degrees according to the heterogeneous spectrum of lived experience). But black vegan scholars suggest that this does not - in itself - rule out “advocating for more than one population at once”. As Doreen Akiyo Yomoah (2019, p. 46) suggests: We need to confront our own speciesism and “our participation in the exploitation of nonhuman animals” as well as other humans, as part of a wider examination



of privilege. For Syl Ko (2017), this entanglement of racism and speciesism can be traced back to the fact that “the human-animal divide is the ideological bedrock underlying the framework of white supremacy. The negative notion of “the animal” is the anchor of this system” (Ko, 2017, p. 45). As such, the Ko sisters argue that a strict human-animal binary and the pejorative notion of the animal not only served white supremacy under colonialism but continues to undergird contemporary structural racism and speciesism.

*No universal unlearning or vulnerability*

Finally – joining the two previous concerns together – this idea of the ‘standard human’ acts a reminder (to me) that the critique of mastery must not fall into the trap of positing some uniform or universal vulnerability as a new model for how to think. Vulnerability to things outside our control and co-dependence rather than autonomy– may be what all lives have in common, but qualities of vulnerability are clearly radically different and need to be differently valued in specific contexts. On this matter of vulnerability and mastery, I am also informed by the thinking another of the *how to think* podcast contributors: writer and healing arts practitioner Omikemi. For their part, Omikemi reflects insightfully on the multivalence of vulnerability as that which has a capacity to be both a potent and radical form of transformation and what they call ‘a hustle’: just one more way of selling yourself. But also, for the ongoing need for attentiveness to the philosophical tendency and/or the tendency of whiteness to universalize itself:

I feel like so many of us have been beckoned... into showing [y]our vulnerability. And then somehow there's a moment where that slips into the game, into the hustle. And I'm really exploring that in myself. Where it becomes something ... yeah, where it becomes something that I in some way sell... When does vulnerability become a hustle? [laughter] ... I feel like I can be quite raw and unedited. But sometimes that's the hustle, you know? [laughs]

There's a potency and there's something radical about ... vulnerability – in a, in a certain way. But it, but it's often been made, like, it's kind of dismissed or ... or like, oh you're weak, or you're fragile if you need, if you need care... But actually, we all need care. There is a point when the vulnerability can become the hustle. But the vulnerability can also be the place of, like, deep transformation. And it can be potent and it can be quite radical, you know, as well, to turn to each other in that way. And it's hard.

Yeah. Vulnerability. There's so much around that at the moment. All these different speakers. And everyone wants to be vulnerable. [laughs] I'd like to be too. But I think that means different things for different people. And I'm quite resistant to this kind of uniform vulnerability (Omikemi, 2021).



### **Conclusion: “how to think”?**

“How to think” is not an instruction (*This is how to think*) but a question: how to think in this particular encounter? Returning to the questions I posed at the start: *How to think from human entanglement in nonhuman life rather than from an assumption of separation and exception? How to put a non-universalizing, dehumanist ethics of knowledge into practice? How to practice an ethics of knowledge in relation to nonhuman animals, built on the principle of differential continuity or kinship in difference rather than the logic of analogy as the shared logic of anthropocentrism and other oppressive modes of thought?*

Humans need to (re-)think concepts not on their own but alongside and in dialogue with their differing interactions with nonhuman animals. Interspecies performance is one place where this dialogic thinking can happen; a field of practice that offers a lot of different possibilities for how this thinking might be *done* or how new interspecies concepts of language, performance, philosophy might be produced in and as performance. The emphasis is on the real need to pay attention to thought as a performative *practice* (not as ‘in the head’ or distanced theorising): as a singular event or process that takes place in a specific field of power relations. The ideas we have about human/nonhuman animals – anthropocentrism & human exceptionalism - are not “just” ideas; they are real insofar as they get under our skin, inhabit our different bodies (differently), shape our perception as well as determining the lives of animals themselves.

In contrast, I suggest that we might get to a new ethics of knowledge through forms of unlearning. We need to unlearn anthropocentrism as structuring knowledge within Theatre and Performance Studies. Specifically, we can think in terms of undoing or letting go of at least three things: firstly, old ideas about ourselves – such as the idea of the researcher as a master of human reason; secondly, speciesist assumptions about nonhuman animals that have been ingrained (for many of us) through anthropocentric culture; thirdly, abandon exclusionary concepts of performance, for example, as ‘deliberate, conscious, chosen activity’ (Schechner, 2003). In terms of this last point, we need to abandon those more reductive definitions of performance in favour of those that affirm a more expanded view of what counts as ‘conscious behaviour’, ‘pretence’, ‘intention’ and so forth. With regards the first of these, this could involve exploring the idea that there are different levels of consciousness exhibited by different animals including humans. But it could also go further by acknowledging the possibility that animals might be differently conscious from each other (and indeed, from themselves) in a qualitative sense (without feeling the need to structure such differences into a hierarchy). Correlatively, it could be that what is required is



to abandon altogether our need to approach animals with a predetermined definition of performance already in hand, in favour of allowing performance to remain open to perpetual mutation and reconceptualization in the face of our encounters with animals.

Secondly, I propose that unlearning (or other practices of openness) may lead the way to transformational interspecies encounters: practice of inclusion beyond analogy, qualitative expansion or mutation of performance and knowledge through encounters with nonhuman animals. This invites us to consider Animal Performance Studies research as a lived, embodied process of coming into contact with the ways in which animals communicate and perform beyond reductive, anthropocentric definitions.

My long-term aim is to articulate and practice an ethics/politics of knowledge built on the principle of differential continuity (or a continuum of difference): the shared, yet heterogeneous nature of human and nonhuman animal worlds. *Differing, like us*. This can only be produced by unlearning logics that measure all life according to human standards, or more accurately dominant accounts of what counts as the ‘standard human’. I am interested in how this figure of the human standard / standard human operates in i) the politics of how we create concepts, ii) how we do research and/or think of ourselves as researchers, and iii) in/as the oppression of both humans and nonhumans.

I have not spoken about or defined radical equality in this talk. As my dear collaborator Rajni Shah says: “equality, such a problematic word...” (Shah, 2022). And indeed, following Julietta Singh once more – who does not define mastery because to do so would be to reinforce it – perhaps the effort is not to define radical equality according to an authoritarian gesture, but to rethink it in dialogue and conversation with human and nonhuman others, across difference, in order to allow a sense of its qualities to emerge. It is to rethink the concept of equality by *unlearning anthropocentric and colonial approaches to performance and the politics of knowledge alongside one another*: not as a theory or transcendent goal, but as experimental practice engaging different human and nonhuman animal lives. (I feel as though I have only just begun). But crucially, it is also a project that must be continuously attentive to its own performative consistency: not merely replacing an old model of the human standard or standard human as white, male subject of Reason, with a new one of universal becoming or vulnerability.





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**Assessment modality**

Guest

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